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ABSTRACT

Educational theorists repeatedly call for more hands-on, authentic, interpretative instruction in social studies. They characterize such instruction as "helping students understand the knowledge construction process" or teaching students "to construct their own historical narratives." While there have been some exceptions, most theorists have called for this type of instruction on the high school level, yet the written work produced by elementary students suggests strongly that much younger students are capable of grasping the complexity of historical selection and explanation. Working with an experienced elementary school teacher, a researcher planned a history unit that was both informative and somewhat emotional, i.e., capable of engaging sixth-graders on a personal level. The core book selected was Jerry Stanley's "I Am an American: A True Story of Japanese Internment." Besides this book, the children read other material, both primary and secondary, which was discussed and responded to in poetry, art, and writing. Children were then asked to write and illustrate their own two-part books: part 1 explained what happened and part 2 explained why a study of the camps is significant. Excerpts from students' books demonstrate an ability among elementary students to come to grips with history in an intelligent, active, responsive way. They respond rather than recite, create rather than copy. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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CONNECTING THE PAST AND PRESENT: READING HISTORY

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When asked to consider the significance of the Japanese internment--the forced evacuation and detention of Japanese-Americans during World War II--Elizabeth, a sixth grader, began by writing about history as a source of lessons from the past that can help us deal with the future. She wrote:

> It is important for everyone to know about the Japanese internment so that America won't make the same mistake again. This can be prevented if people educate themselves about those [people] different from themselves. If people weren't so ignorant they would think, "Could this happen to me? Could this happen to my best friend?"

Elizabeth went on to compare the forced removal of Japanese-Americans from their homes with the forced removal of Jews, Native Americans, and Bosnians during different periods of history. She explained how these stories resonate with shared meaning:

> In Germany people listened to Hitler and thought Jews were evil. People believed this because the Jews were successful in business. In the same way, the Japanese were successful in farming which made American farmers jealous.

This has happened throughout history. Cherokee Natives were moved because we wanted the land. Africans were taken from their homes because people wanted them for slaves. People in Bosnia are being moved for their land, and often being killed.

Finally, Elizabeth ended by discussing the fact that Japanese-Americans were systematically denied basic rights guaranteed by the Constitution. She wrote:

The Constitution was violated. The Constitution is supposed to protect Japanese-Americans in time of need. People think it's safe to live in America so that things like this don't happen to them. Japanese-Americans never thought America would control their lives and take away their freedom.

Elizabeth's writing is unique, not only for its ideas about lessons we can learn from history, but because it was written by a 12 year old. In response to a carefully planned program of study, Elizabeth showed that she could deal with the question of historical significance, a very real question for anyone seriously thinking about history, and do so in a meaningful way. She was able to do this even though in many respects she is a novice historian.

As teachers, we continue to hear repeated calls for more hands-on, authentic, interpretative instruction in social

studies. Such instruction is characterized as "help[ing] students understand the knowledge construction process" (Banks, 1995, p. 14), or teaching students "to construct their own historical narratives" (Holt, 1990, p. 12), or "providing students with ample opportunities to practice the roles of knower and inquirer, the namer of significance, rather than only the receiver of knowledge" (Gabella, 1994, p. 352). In each case the message is the same: Students need to take hold and grapple with the subject matter the way historians do.

Although there have been some exceptions (Jorgensen & Venable, 1993; Levine & Berg, 1989; Zarnowski, 1990, 1995), most voices for reforming history instruction direct their attention to high school teaching and learning. Yet the writing produced by children like Elizabeth is one more indication that critical engagement with history can and should begin much earlier. For elementary school children, opportunities for retelling, interpreting, and evaluating information about the past are meaningful and productive activities. We should not wait until students are in high school and have already ingested huge doses of what James Banks refers to as <u>school knowledge</u> --"a body of facts that are not to be questioned, criticized, or reconstructed" (Banks, 1995, p. 14). Instead, we need to acknowledge that children are ready to think about history much earlier.

<u>Raising the Question of Historical Significance</u>

In order to promote more critical engagement with

history for youngsters in one sixth grade class, I planned with their teacher to focus the children's attention on the question of historical significance. There were several reasons for doing this. First, significance is an issue of importance for all historians, since they simply cannot include every detail they unearth in their research. Selecting which information to include and which to reject means making choices according to perceived importance. That is why significance is referred to as "the valuing criterion" (Seixas, 1994, p. 281). Second, by having students consider the question of significance, they would be having the same kind of conversations historians have within their own professional community. They would be putting forth their ideas tentatively--suggesting possibilities and personal perceptions rather than reciting someone else's conclusions. And finally, I relished the idea of posing to students the question,"Is it important to know this?" before they could ask me the more traditional version, "Why do I have to know this?" I was curious to see whether students would connect what happened to Japanese-Americans during World War II with their own lives in 1995 or dismiss these events as irrelevant. And if students did find the Japanese internment relevant, what would be the connections they made?

In order to do this, I worked with Lila Alexander, an experienced classroom teacher, and her sixth graders. Together, Lila and I planned to first immerse the children in material that was both informative and yet somewhat

emotional--that is, factual material that would provide children with a great deal of new information to think about, yet at the same time provide them with enough human interest so that they might develop feelings of sympathy and empathy.

The core book we selected was Jerry Stanley's I Am an American: A True Story of Japanese Internment. This book satisfied our criteria for excellent nonfiction: It was written by a professional historian who is also an award winning writer of nonfiction for children; it is based largely on original interviews of several Japanese-Americans who had been interned during World War II; and it contains numerous photographs from the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and personal collections. It also satisfied our criteria for personal, emotional content: It focuses on the personal experience of a single individual, Shi Nomura, a young man about to graduate from high school and propose marriage when "his plans were shattered by race prejudice and war" (Stanley, 1994, p. 4). We hoped that thinking about Shi's unique experience would provide a bridge that would enable children to think about the experiences of the 120,000 others whose lives were also affected. Besides this book, the children read other material--both primary and secondary sources--which was discussed and responded to in poetry, art, and writing. They also had the opportunity to speak with a Japanese-American man whose parents had been interned.

I will restrict my comments to the books the children wrote at the end of several months of study because it is in

these books they specifically dealt with the question of significance. Children were asked to write and illustrate books that had two parts: The first part which I called The Japanese Internment: What Happened? consisted of a retelling of the events. Students were asked to consider the following questions: What happened? Who was involved? When did it happen? Where did it happen? Why did it happen? Of course, even what at first appears to be a rather straightforward retelling turns out to involve selection, and selection implies decisions about significance.

In the second part of their books, children were asked more directly to consider the question of significance. This part, which I called The Japanese Internment: What It Means to Me consisted of an evaluation or "valuing" of the events studied. In writing this part, students were asked to consider these questions: Is it important for you to know what happened to the Japanese people? Is it useful? Could something like this ever happen to you or people you care about? When you think about the Japanese internment, does it remind you of any other events? How did you feel while you were learning about the Japanese internment?

It is possible that students perceived of these as leading questions and that, in addition, the class time spent studying the internment was an indication of its importance, but we considered this the price we would have to pay in order to raise the issue of significance in an up-front way.

Significance as a Focus for Studying History

The primary reason for having children deal with the question of significance was that it would enable them to deal with history in a challenging, active, mind-gripping way. They would do so in a manner very close to what practicing historians do. In addition to this, in the process of evaluating historical significance, we hoped that children would discover the more general benefits of studying history--its relevance for their lives.

Many people doubt the relevance of historical study. This attitude contributes to what historians and social commentators refer to as "the crisis of history" (Kaye, 1991): At the very time when we most need a historical perspective, we tend to doubt its value. We are a present oriented society. What can the past tell us about the present? We know more about science and technology than people did in the past. How can we benefit from studying a less sophisticated time?

Yet if we move beyond a surface, one-to-one comparison of then and now, a convincing argument can be made for the relevance of historical study both on a personal and societal level (Vaughn, 1985). It is on these two levels, the personal, or how the study of history benefits us as individuals, and the societal, or how the study of history benefits us as members of a community, that I looked for evidence of the sixth graders' engagement with history.

On a personal level, history enlarges our range of

experiences and makes us less egocentric. When we study history we learn how other people in other times and places have confronted problems similar to our own. As historian Stephen Vaughn (1985, p. 8) reminds us:

> It is difficult to name a social, political, or economic problem--or an effort to solve such a problem--not shaped by history. Questions about war and peace, race relations, the distribution of wealth, the place of government, the fate of the environment, and the role of the sexes, to mention but a few such matters, have been confronted before.

A sixth grader named Armando wrote about how learning history broadened his range of experience. Not only was he unaware of the Japanese internment before our study, he also assumed everyone else was too. After describing the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, he wrote:

> We all remember this time. It was the time when Pearl Harbor was destroyed. There is one event, <u>unknown to almost everybody</u>, that happened because of this tragedy. It was the internment of all the Japanese-Americans in the U.S. [italics added]

Armando also related to the Japanese internment on a personal level by considering the possibility that a similar event could affect his family. By recognizing the persistence of prejudice across time, he also discovered the corresponding need to be alert to the acts of people and government. He wrote:

> Unfortunately, something like this could happen to me or my family. People and the government can get so prejudiced that they could plan something just like the Evacuation Order. [italics added]

Again, on a personal level, Armando shared his feelings about learning about this event:

> As I was learning about the Japanese-American internment, I was terrified. With all the troubles we have now, this is one of the most terrifying things in history. [italics added]

Armando has widened the range of his experiences and connected problems that occurred in the past with problems both real and possible, in his own life.

On a societal level, history provides us with a long range perspective on social issues and helps us understand the origin of these issues. History reveals our limitations

along with our achievements. And, as Vaughn reminds us, "historical study can serve as an antidote to the misuse of history by our leaders" (1985, p. 10).

Giselle, in contrast to Armando, responded to learning about the Japanese internment largely on the societal level. She wrote:

> It's very important for us to know about the internment of the Japanese-Americans, because we have to learn from the past. We have to learn about how the government reacted to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, so it will show the government of tomorrow how not to treat a group of people in a time of war. It's very important to hear stories about the internment camp so we can pick people for our offices who wouldn't do that to us or the people we care about. [italics added].

These excerpts from Armando and Giselle's writing are representative of the ways that youngsters connect with the past on both a personal and societal level. Their responses show the ability of elementary school children to come to grips with history in an intelligent, active, responsive way. Children like Armando and Giselle who actively confront history, respond rather than recite, create rather than copy, and interpret rather than ingest.

Historical Study as Motivation for Literacy Learning

In the elementary school, the concerns of historians can

be purposefully joined with the concerns language arts educators. While studying history, children deal with primary and secondary sources, consider multiple perspectives, and evaluate competing narratives; they do this by writing in journals, discussing topics in small and large groups, and writing for audiences beyond the classroom. This is the world of the history workshop (Brown, 1994), a setting in which novice historians approximate the work of skilled historians. It is a specialized form of writing workshop.

The activities of the history workshop require time for children to develop understanding, question what they are learning, and develop an interest in the endeavor. Motivation, as one youngster tells us, develops over time as we learn new things and then want to know more. Describing himself as an author, he tells us about persistence, motivation, and history learning. He writes:

> Benhur is not perfect but he tries hard. He loves basketball, and he wants to be a basketball player. *Benhur was never interested in Japanese Americans, but he got useful to the subject and started to love it.* [italics added]

Learning history, it seems, is largely a matter of learning to see its significance.

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